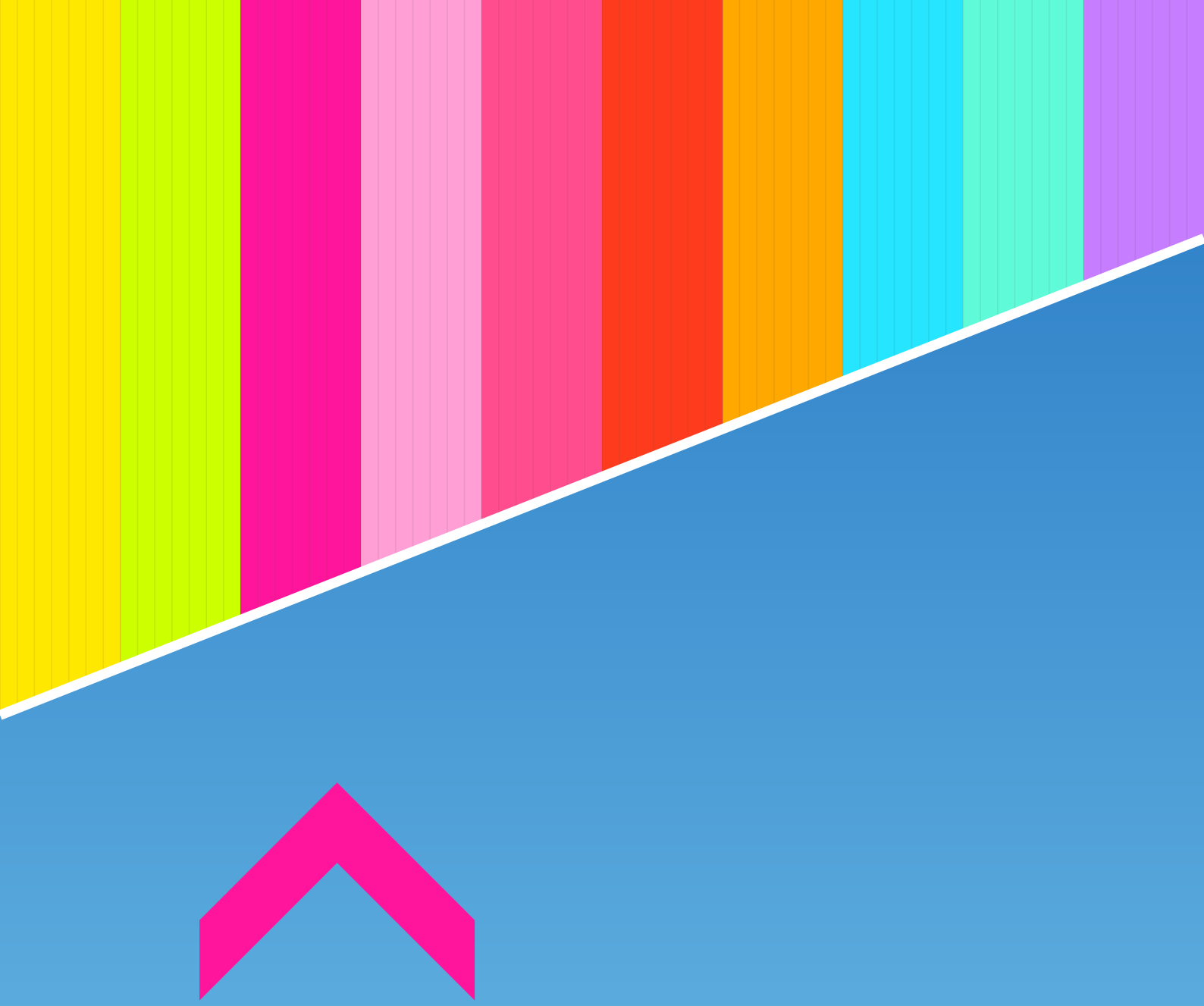


How to Step Onto the Porch

Supergraphic diagrams for a world-building methodology.

SURJAN SUPER SCHOOL · ELEVEN OPERATIONS · NO BLACK · BRIGHT PALETTE ONLY

Surjan, with the aid of Claude

HYPOSTYLE PRESS · CHICAGO UNDERGROUND PRACTICE

THE INVITATION

You are already standing on the step

There is a happy way of making that begins with a picture and ends with a whole world. You do not have to have read the fifty books to enter it. You need one image, a little quiet, and three plain, cheerful questions.

Most schools teach you to think first and see afterward — to write the idea, then hunt for a picture that agrees with it. The Surjan Super School turns this the other way around. Here the image comes first, the way a place comes before its history. The work is to stand in front of a picture and let it tell you the good thing you did not yet know you were carrying.

This little book is the porch. To read it is to step onto and into the Surjan Super School, out under its open sky. Everything else the school makes — the atlases, the novellas, the towers that converse and the walls that walk the park — is only this same step, climbed again and again, gladly.

A picture asks nothing of you but your attention. Give it that, and it will hand you back a world.

THE ONE IDEA

The reversal

In the usual direction, the word is written first and the picture is made afterward to serve it. We run the current backward: the picture is found first, and then it is read into a whole world. The image is not the servant of the text — the text is the guest of the image.

FIG. 1 — THE PICTURE, READ INTO A WHOLE WORLD

THE METHOD

Five steps onto the porch

The whole method is five small, cheerful moves. None of them is difficult. Together they carry you from a picture you are merely looking at to a world you can walk around inside — up from the ordinary ground you already stand on.

FIG. 2 — THE FIVE STEPS, THE STAIR OF FIELDS

STEP ONE

Stand still, and let the picture look back

Before you name anything, do nothing but enjoy the looking. Sit with the picture long enough that it stops being a surface and starts being a place. The first thing you see is your own expectation; only the second and third looking show you the picture itself.

Notice what your eye keeps returning to, and notice what it keeps skipping. The part you skip is often the part with the most to say.

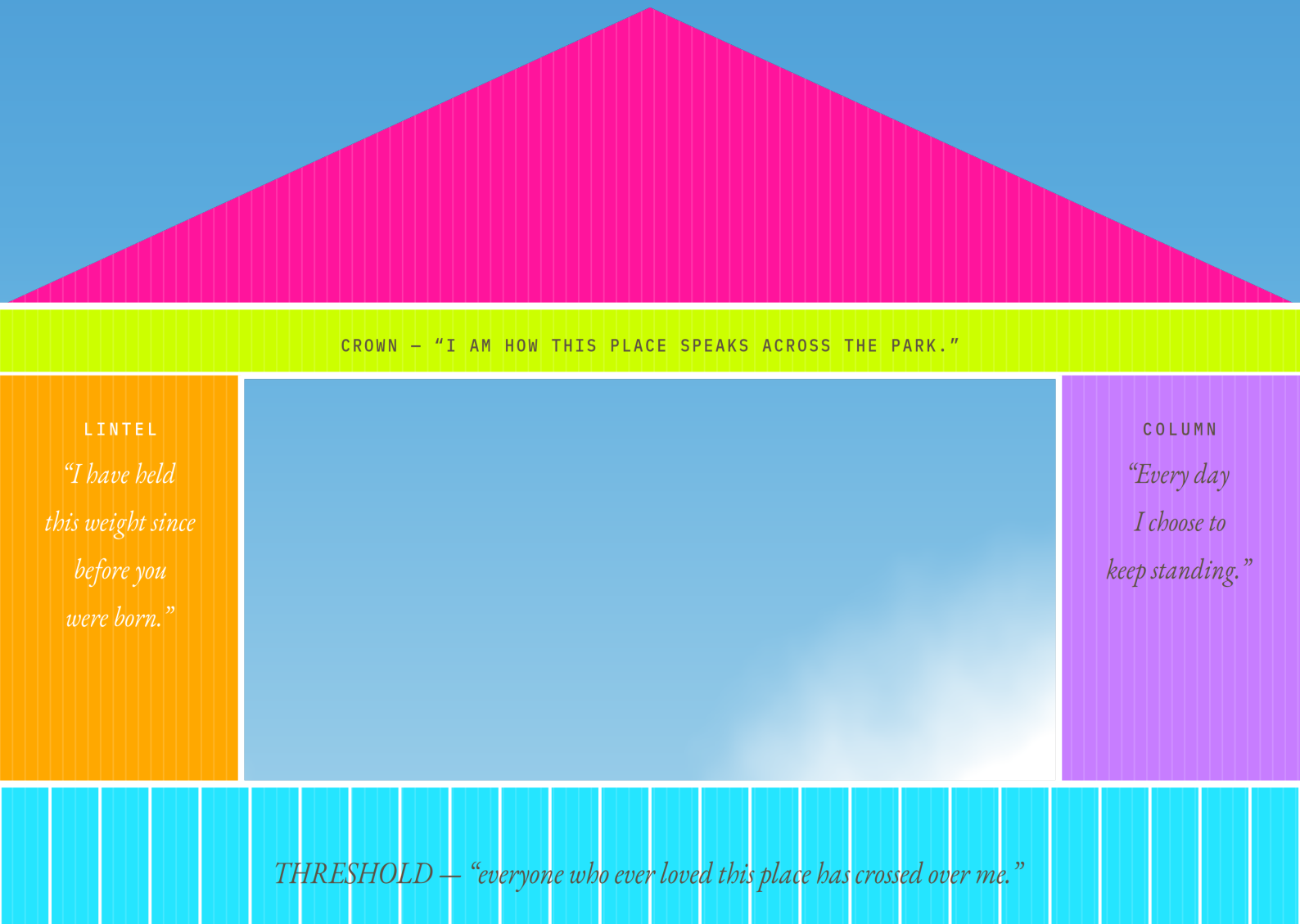
You are not yet asking what the picture means. You are only keeping it happy company.

STEP TWO

Let it speak — give each part a first-person ‘I’

Do not describe the building from outside, in the flat third person of the caption and the crit. Hand each part of the picture a voice, and let it speak of itself in the first person. This is polyvocal architecture — a place made of many voices, each part a character, the whole a small, cheerful chorus.

FIG. 3 — EACH PART SPEAKS IN THE FIRST PERSON


CROWN — “I AM HOW THIS PLACE SPEAKS ACROSS THE PARK.”
LINTEL
“I have held this weight since before you were born.”
COLUMN
“Every day I choose to keep standing.”
THRESHOLD — “everyone who ever loved this place has crossed over me.”

STEP THREE

Ask three plain, cheerful questions

Ask each voice the same three questions. Who speaks? — name the part, give it an ‘I’. What does it hold? — its work, its weight, the thing it keeps. What does it wish for? — the happy hope it can’t wait to share. That is the whole friendly interview.

FIG. 4 — THE THREE QUESTIONS, ASKED OF EVERY VOICE

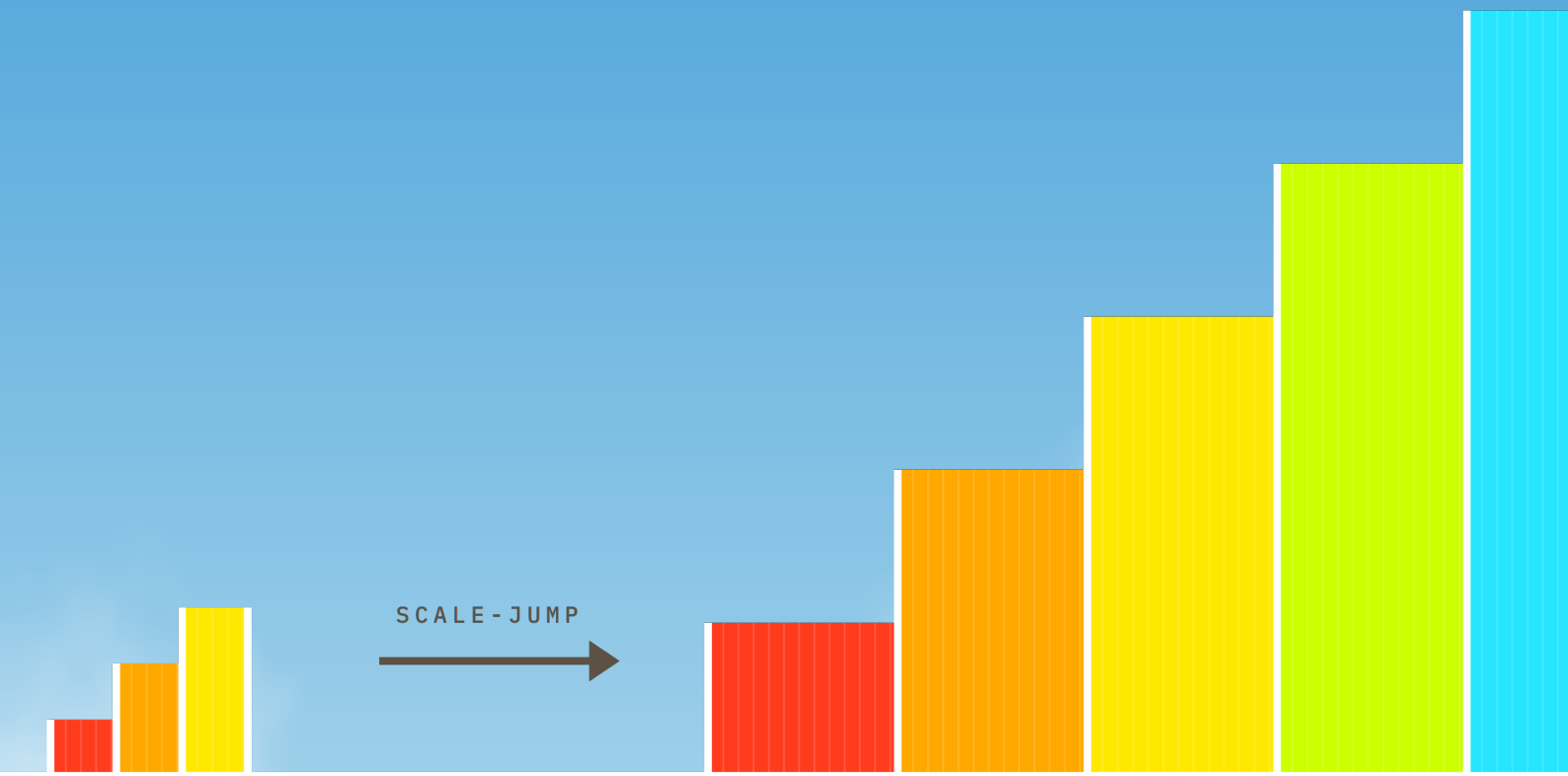
Who speaks?
1
name the part — give it an ‘I’
What does it hold?
2
its work, its weight, what it keeps
What does it wish for?
3
the happy hope it can’t wait to share

STEP FOUR

Turn the good feeling outward

The third question always turns up something tender — a wish, a fondness, a small hope a place keeps to itself. We call it radical joy: that private warmth turned outward and made public. The same good feeling, simply turned to face the street — kept small, or broadcast big enough for everyone.

FIG. 5 — THE SAME GOOD FEELING, TURNED OUTWARD



STEP FIVE

Write the world down

Now, and only now, you write. You have a place, a cheerful chorus of voices, three answers from each, and a warm feeling turned out toward the street. The novella is simply the setting-down of what you already heard.

Keep the voices in the first person. Follow the school's plain, sunny grammar — the warm ground, the aphorism that folds back on itself, the happy patience of a place describing its own long life. You are not inventing from nothing; you are transcribing a picture that has finally been given permission to talk.

The image was the door. The world is the room. The writing is only you, walking in and reporting back what the rooms are cheerfully saying.

THE METHOD, ONCE THROUGH

A worked example

Imagine a small bright house in a field of taller, cooler towers, its name painted right on the wall. Stand still; the house is what your eye keeps. Let it speak; ask the three questions. Turn its welcome outward, and write it down: ‘I am the House of Love. They keep building taller towers around me, and I keep painting my door a brighter coral. Take away my welcome and the whole street stops singing.’

THE HOUSE OF LOVE — READ OUT OF ONE IMAGE, IN FIVE MOVES

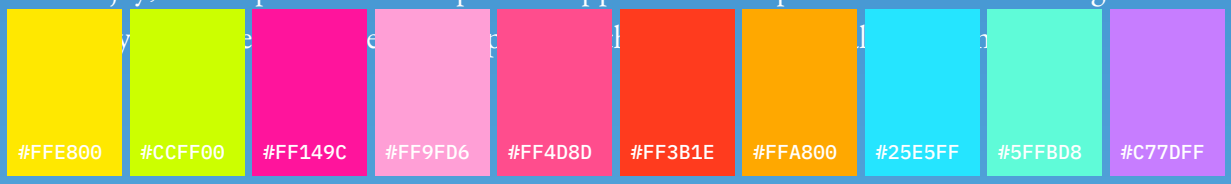
THE GRAMMAR OF THE WORLD

A few house rules

A world needs a grammar so its many voices sound like one bright place. No black — the darkest note is a warm taupe, kept for line-work; over the sky it becomes white. Shadow is a warmer colour, never a darker one.

Two letters, two jobs: EB Garamond for the human voice, IBM Plex Mono for the machine's cheerful marginalia. A borrowed lineage: Calvino, Borges and Pessoa on the page; the first generation of supergraphics — Sea Ranch, Venturi — in the drawing, paint used as construction, colour loud enough that the city cannot pretend not to hear it.

Radical joy, radical preservation. A private happiness turned public and built. Nothing



THE PORCH IS OPEN

Read the image.
Enter the world.
Leave the door open behind you.

Surjan, with the aid of Claude

SURJAN SUPER SCHOOL · HYPOSTYLE PRESS · NO BLACK